

## For the best by Ailendolin

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**Summary:** Spoilers for Season 3. Post-finale. Steve was a lot of things. Okay wasn't one of them.

## **For the best**

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**For the best**

### **Chapter 1: Steve**

The fight was over – for now, at least. Steve wasn't stupid enough to think it was over for good. This was not his first rodeo, after all. He knew those things would come back to haunt them one day, in one form or another. They always did and he'd resigned himself to that fact the moment this nightmare began for the second time with Dustin's adopted demodog. Danger nowadays, Steve had learned, lurked everywhere. In the woods, on the streets – even under shopping malls. He should have known better, should have been prepared for the next disaster. He should have expected this.

But he hadn't. He had been blindsided by it all until it was too late and they were once more in too deep in the blink of an eye. He'd paid the prize for that. Hopper had, too, and Billy, and so many more. It made Steve's head hurt just to think about it – all that loss, all that death. So many lives irreversibly changed. It was almost overwhelming to try to comprehend the magnitude of it all and there was a tightness in Steve's chest that made it hard to breathe when he thought about all those people.

At least the kids were safe. They hadn't been taken, hadn't been seriously hurt and neither the Mindflayer nor the Russians had gotten to them. Steve closed his eyes and sighed, silently thanking whatever deity was out there for looking out for them. They had been so unbelievably lucky. He didn't quite know what Mike, Lucas, Max and El had been up to, but he was painfully aware of the danger Dustin and Erica had been in. The elevator was what first came to mind. They could have died in that cabin and Steve could feel the panic he'd had during the free-fall even now in his very bones, hours later. He remembered realizing that they were all going to die and he'd be responsible for the death of two kids and the one friend he had somehow managed to make since all the shit went down in the Byers'

house for the first time – and that, knowing it was his fault his friends would die, had been so much worse than the idea of his own impending death.

His panic in the elevator, though, was nothing compared to the frenzied fear Steve had experienced when the Russians had discovered hopelessly outnumbered them. Without thinking he'd thrown himself against the door to buy the others a few precious seconds of time which he knew could mean the difference between life and death. When Robin came to his aid Steve had been simultaneously dismayed and so relieved to have her by his side. He hated himself a little bit for the latter. But then Dustin hadn't wanted to leave and for one horrible moment Steve thought it would all be in vain, they would all be captured and the kids would be hurt because of him, because he was an awful friend and couldn't keep them safe.

He would have never forgiven himself if Dustin and Erica had been tortured like he was. It was bad enough he had ratted out Dustin to the Russians. Drug or no drug, Dustin was right: Steve should have resisted more. He should have just kept his mouth shut, no matter what they did to him. Dustin was like a little brother to him, like family, and Steve should have protected him like he was supposed to. He'd failed in that regard and that hurt more than any punch the Russians had thrown at him.

Not that those punches hadn't hurt as well. They had. Fiercely. One of his eyes was almost swollen shut and his head hurt nearly as badly as when Billy had beaten him up during the last supernatural crisis. The paramedics had told him he'd been lucky, though: no concussion, no broken bones – no trip to the hospital for him. Steve hadn't mentioned that he'd been tortured and drugged, or how he still felt nauseous and dizzy whenever he moved too fast. He hadn't told them about the punches to his stomach, the kicks, the pain blooming in his chest every time he took a breath. And he hadn't said a word about how scared he had been, so scared his hands wouldn't stop shaking even now.

Instead he'd gone home. He'd stayed long enough to make sure the kids were taken care of and wouldn't be alone and then he'd left as quietly as possible without making a fuss. They all had enough to worry about without him in the picture. All he needed was a glass of

water, some pain meds and a couple of hours of sleep and he'd be okay. At least that was what he told himself.

His apartment was dark and eerily quiet when he came home. It wasn't much: one room that served as both living room and bedroom, a small niche which housed an even smaller kitchen, and a bathroom that included a moldy shower, sink and toilet. He'd been living in this dump for a few months now, ever since his parents threw him out and cut him off for choosing his own path in life instead of going to college. Their final argument had been loud and earth-shattering, and the slamming of the door had been deafening in its finality. Steve still remembered how lost he'd felt that day. How alone. For the first time in his life he hadn't known what to do, how to move forward.

The next week was a blur of hazy memories. He'd slept in his car – though sleeping was a generous term. He would park on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, right on the edge of the forest in which *things* and monsters lurked, and spent the night trying not to fall apart. Constantly on edge, waking up from every weird noise he wasn't used to, his nightmares had a field day. They turned from bad to vicious, from sporadic to frequent, and left him shaking like a leaf and panting for breath every night. It didn't help that he had begun skipping meals as well. Trying to stretch what little money he still had he'd figured one or two small meals a day were enough to get him by. After a few days of keeping this up he began to get dizzy from both lack of food and lack of sleep and started tripping over his own two feet.

After a little more than a week of that his body crashed. He'd been at the Byers', watching the kids play that weird game he still didn't understand no matter how often Dustin tried to explain it to him when reality caught up with him. All he'd wanted to do was get some orange juice from the fridge – not for himself but for the kids. He'd bent down to grab the bottle and the last thing he remembered were the black spots dancing in his vision before his eyes rolled back into his head and he hit the floor, hard.

When he woke up, he was lying on the couch and the worried face of Joyce Byers was staring down at him. "Steve? Hey, it's okay. Are you all right?"

Steve didn't know whether it was her kind face, her concerned eyes or the caring tone of her voice that made him break down. Maybe it was because she was the first person to ask him how he was since his parents threw him out, the first one to notice something was wrong, the first one to genuinely care, but in the end it didn't matter. The words spilled out of him without warning and he told her everything: his struggles in school because the words on the pages just made no sense to him, his decision not to go to college (because who would accept someone who can't even read properly?), the subsequent fight with his parents, and finally how he'd been living in his car for the last few days and barely managed to get by. By the end of it all his face had been red with shame and he was unable to meet Mrs. Byers eyes, afraid of judgement. Afraid of being laughed at and turned away.

He wasn't, though. Instead of making him leave Mrs. Byers breathed out a quiet, "Oh, Steve," and pulled him into her arms. Steve had been so surprised by this that for a moment he froze. He couldn't even remember the last time his parents had given him a hug and with that thought tugging at his heart he melted into Mrs. Byers embrace, unable to resist this wonderful feeling of safety and love she so graciously provided.

Later, much later when his breaths didn't come out in tiny panicky gasps anymore, she had told him he could stay for as long as he needed to. And then over the next days and weeks she'd helped him find a place to live, and a job that paid the rent and Steve had never been more grateful to anyone in his entire life than he was to Joyce Byers for her unconditional help and support when he'd hit rock bottom.

Now, staring into the emptiness of his apartment, Steve wished he had never left her little house in the woods. In the short time he had stayed there it had become more of a home to him than his parents' house had ever been. It might have been small and not much to look at, but it was filled with so much warmth and affection despite the horrors that had happened in those four walls. He'd felt safe there, knowing someone was sleeping just a room away and willing to come to his side at the first signs of distress. He'd never had that at his parents' house and he didn't have that here in his apartment – no

company, no help, and no one who would hold his hand when the pain and nightmares became too much.

Steve swallowed and flicked on the lonely light in the bathroom. It was harsh, blinding him for a moment. Carefully, he wrapped his shaking fingers around the hem of his work uniform and began to pull it upwards. He gritted his teeth against the pain as bruised ribs chafed against each other with every movement and his stomach muscles screamed in protest. A sideways glance in the mirror showed him a colorful array of bruises that he knew would hurt even worse tomorrow.

He quickly looked away.

It took an excruciating amount of time until he'd peeled his uniform off. For a moment Steve stood there shivering in the bright, unforgiving light. Then he gathered up what little courage he had left and stepped into the shower. He knew from experience that this would hurt. Water on open wounds wasn't fun at all but the need to wash away the blood and grime from his skin was stronger than his fear of pain. Steeling himself, he turned on the water.

He bit his lip bloody in an attempt to keep quiet.

By the time he was finished his legs were shaking from exhaustion. Quickly, he brushed his teeth, eager to get the taste of drug and vomit out of his mouth, before he dragged himself to his bedroom. He pulled on some briefs and the loosest pair of sweatpants he owned. Not keen on aggravating the bruises littering his chest once more, he forewent a shirt and stumbled into his kitchen for some water and pain meds. He took the last two pills he had and downed them in one go.

His hands were still shaking.

Steve balled them into fists and walked back to his bed. Gingerly, he lowered himself onto the mattress and just sat there for a moment, breathing against the pain, before he slowly lay down. He pulled the blanket up to his chin, feeling cold even though it was July. The shivering didn't stop and in some distant part of his mind he realized that might be because he was going into shock. The adrenaline was

wearing off, the drug was out of his system and the physical and mental horrors of the past few hours were finally catching up with him.

Steve let out a stuttering breath. Shadows danced across his wall, looking too much like multi-legged creatures for his comfort. He turned away from them and curled up beneath his blanket, making himself as small as possible. His heart was beating in a frantic rhythm even though there was no danger anymore, skipping a beat or two every now and then. Steve wanted to crawl out of his skin. Instead he squeezed his eyes shut tightly and dug his fingernails into his arms to ground himself somehow. It helped, a little.

But it wasn't enough.

A noise from outside made him flinch and sent his heart back on its marathon race just when it had started to calm down. Steve whimpered and curled up tighter, pressing his hands against his ears. He wanted this all to stop. He wanted things to go back to normal – not the old normal when he was still a jerk with asshole friends. No, he wanted to go back to the new normal: this semi-peaceful existence between disasters when his biggest problem was figuring out how to sneak the kids into the cinema without losing his job in the process. He wanted to be able to sleep again and not look over his shoulder every five seconds, thinking something was following him.

Steve knew, though, that there was no going back – just as much as he knew that going forward this time would be even more difficult than it had been after the demodogs. It wasn't just monsters he had to be afraid of now. How was he supposed to ever trust someone, a stranger, anyone again? How could he possibly protect Dustin and the others when danger lurked literally everywhere and in any form?

Steve swallowed hard against the bile in his throat. Maybe it would be better if he made himself scarce from now on. He clearly wasn't fit to look after children, much less protect them. The kids often joked about his inability to win a fight but in the end, he knew they spoke the truth. He was practically useless in a fight, unable to hold his own. That didn't stop him from trying, though. He'd do anything to help these kids. As long as they were safe nothing else mattered.

Only this time, it was his fault they weren't safe in the first place. He'd allowed Dustin and Erica to do something dangerous and it had almost ended with them both captured and tortured. Who knew what the Russians would have done to them if the two of them hadn't escaped? Steve couldn't let that happen again. He was a danger to these kids, too young to make responsible decisions. They'd trusted him and he'd screwed up. He was a bad influence and today had more than proven they would be safer and better off without him there, no matter how much it pained him to admit it. He'd grown fond of them all, especially Dustin. He was like the little brother Steve never had and he'd miss him fiercely. But there was no other way. He had to leave. Dustin didn't really need him, not as much as Steve needed Dustin, anyway. Dustin would be fine and move on, eventually. He had other friends.

Steve had ... well, Steve had Robin. Maybe. He wouldn't blame her if she never wanted to have anything to do with him again after he dragged her into this whole mess. She deserved so much better than him and one day, inevitably, she would realize that. People always did. And then they left.

This time Steve would tell them all the trouble and stay away. There were shitty places like Hawkins all over the country where a loser like him could find a job no one else wanted to do. He would leave as soon as possible, when every little movement no longer hurt and he could breathe again without feeling like someone was stabbing him with a knife in the chest. It would take a few days but then he'd be out of everyone's hair and they would all be a little bit safer.

His eyes burned at the thought of being all alone again but his mind was made up. He had been selfish for way too long already. It was time to put the others first. The kids could no longer depend on him to keep them safe. They never should have in the first place and Steve would be damned if he put them in any more danger than they were already in just because he was lonely and craved their company.

No, he thought and his heart beat painfully against his ribcage as if to protest. *I'll go and they'll be safe. It's for the best.*

Exhaustion finally caught up with him and he fell into an uneasy



sleep where evil Russian doctors lurked in a vast black void and Dustin's screams for help echoed in the nothingness.